

Chapter 8

War in Europe: Who Was Responsible?

Many have compared the assassination of President Kennedy and our relationship to Cuba with the assassination of Crown Prince Francis Ferdinand to what happened in



The Archduke and

Serbia. The similarity is that Cuba was a thorn in the side of the U.S., and Serbia was a thorn in the side of Austria-Hungary. The difference is that while we have conclusive evidence that Gavrilo Princip received help from Serbia, only circumstantial evidence linked Cuba to Lee Harvey Oswald. Nevertheless, keep this analogy in mind while reading the following account of events leading from Francis Ferdinand's assassination to the beginning of World War I.

The Immediate Aftermath

One of the key men linked to Ferdinand's assassination was Milan Ciganovitch. He was a minor Serbian official and a member of an anti-Austrian terrorist organization known as the Black Hand. Ciganovitch recruited Princip and another man involved in the assassination. He trained both of these men in the use of revolvers and stationed them along the parade route in Sarajevo. After the assassination, Serbian officials allowed Ciganovitch to escape. The Serbs even kept sending him his salary under an assumed name. Serbian officials also prevented Austrians from learning more details of Ciganovitch's involvement in the plot.

The 'Blank Check'

One week after the assassination, Austrian and German officials met secretly. Germany urged the Austrians to take a firm stand regarding Serbia. If this meant war, the Germans promised, they would support Austria to the hilt. (This support was later characterized as a 'blank check on the resources of the German Empire') Since the Austrians had backed down on previous crises in the Balkans, Germany felt this encouragement was necessary.

The Ten Demands

Germany's attempts to get Austria-Hungary to take a tough stand succeeded. Austrian officials sent a blistering note to Serbia, one of the toughest warnings in diplomatic history. It accused Serbia of stirring up the hostility that hatched the plot to kill Francis Ferdinand. Furthermore, it blamed the Serbs for doing nothing to prevent the assassination. Finally, this diplomatic bombshell gave Serbia 48 hours to meet the following demands:

- End all propaganda against Austria in your newspapers, magazines, and public schools.
- Remove all officials hostile to Austria from your government, and allow Austria to take part in suppressing all plots directed against Austria
- Arrest all the conspirators involved in the assassination plot, including Ciganovitch, and allow Austria to take part in their trials.

Digital History

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu

- Close borders to all illegal crossings into Austria, and offer suitable explanations for all anti-Austrian statements made by your officials.
- Reply by 6 P.M., July 25, 1914, that all the foregoing measures are being carried out.

This stern note was sent to Serbia exactly 48 hours before a satisfactory response was demanded..

Responses to Austria's Demands

Before replying, Serbia asked assurances of support from Russia, the only ally near enough to help her. When the Russian Foreign Minister read Austria's note he commented, "this means war." With that, Russia became the first country in this crisis to begin the process of mobilizing its troops.¹⁴ Russia justified calling up her troops because it took the inefficient military in the vast country and with insufficient railroads linking its major cities far longer to prepare for war than it took either Germany or Austria-Hungary.

Despite support from Russia, Serbia drew up a conciliatory response to Austria's demands. It promised to heed to some of the demands and asked for further clarification on others. The only demand rejected outright was 'allowing Austria to participate in the trial of alleged conspirators.' Because Serbian leaders believed Austria would attack despite their attempt to meet its demands, Serbia called up her reserves. Receiving Serb's reply by the 6 P.M. deadline, Austrian leaders hardly bothered to read it, and immediately recalled their ambassador from Serbia. Along with his entire staff, the Austrian ambassadors caught the 6:30 train to Vienna that evening. Three days later (on July 28th), Austria declared war on Serbia and shelled its capitol, Belgrade.

Germany Tries to Stem the Tide of Impending War

During the crisis, Emperor William I of Germany was cruising in the royal yacht and could not be reached. That left Germany's policy in the hands of Foreign Minister Bethmann-Hollweg, who would continue advising Austria to take decisive action against Serbia. When William finally returned to Berlin on July 28th and read Serbia's reply to the demands, he was so pleased that he wrote, "It is more than can be expected. With it every reason for war drops away." With that William tried desperately to reverse the forces which his "blank check" had set in motion. He asked Austria to reconsider its declaration of war against Serbia. Failing this, he pleaded with Austria to announce that she would not take territory from Serbia. When this plea also fell on deaf ears, William did not do the one thing that might have prevented war; he did not inform the Austrians that he would cancel his 'blank check' if the Austrians failed to make peace with Serbia.

Having failed to halt his ally, Austria-Hungary, William tried influencing his potential enemy, Russian Tsar Nicholas II. Addressing his note to "cousin Nicki," the German monarch asked Russia to stop mobilizing. Fearing a war with both Germany and Austria-Hungary, Nicholas ordered the general mobilization reduced to a partial mobilization. His generals argued that this would be too confusing. The next day, July 29th, Nicholas learned that the Austrians had shelled Belgrade, capital of Serbia. With a heavy heart, Tsar Nicholas reversed his orders once more. Posters appeared throughout that vast country warning that preparations for war would take preference over all other activities. On that day (July 30th), Russia's allies, England and France began their preparations for war.

¹⁴ Mobilization in those days was considered to be a preparation for an attack on another country.

War Begins

As of noon, July 31st, Germany alone among the great nations in Europe had not called up its reserves. By this time Germany's generals were frantically pleading with their Emperor to start mobilizing. Their arguments were based on the logic of military necessity. Germany's defense depended on its ability to land a knockout punch against its enemy in the west (France), before turning to meet the expected attack from Russia in the east. Any further delay, the generals argued, would force Germany into the perilous plight of having to fight a war on two fronts at the same time.

Emperor William II tried once more to halt Russia's and France's preparations for war. At 3:30 P.M. July 31st he sent telegrams to both countries. He gave Russia 12 and France 18 hours to stop mobilizing. The deadline passed with no word from Russia; William extended the deadline for another 5 hours, and still no word. As her deadline approached, France called up her troops. Two hours later, Germany declared war on Russia. With that, all hopes for peace vanished and World War I began on August 1, 1914.

Germany Attacks France

The German general staff had worked on plans to attack France since 1892. Constantly revised and refined, the plans called for a lightning attack on France by the German army through neutral Belgium despite Germany's international guarantee to respect Belgium's neutrality. The German war machine swung into action with unbelievable timing. With the precision of a Swiss watch, soldiers and supplies from all parts of the nation were loaded onto trains that arrived at their destination precisely as scheduled, were unloaded and quickly returned in time to for the next run.



Devastated Belgium

France had not been prepared for Germany's attack on the country whose neutrality she had pledged herself to defend. But the German's demand that Belgium allow her troops to march through this neutral country was refused. Despite its lack of preparation, Belgium heroically held off the German war machine for 18 days, and Belgium's defense of its homeland gave France the time it needed to fully mobilize its troops. Hoping to cut off German troops as they marched into Belgium, France

used the time to launch an attack on Germany through Lorraine. However, Germany had anticipated such an attack, and France lost her best soldiers and officers in a gallant but futile attempt to overwhelm Germany defenses.

When the French counter-attack failed, German troops poured into France. Germany pushed the French and the army Great Britain had sent to help its retreating ally back by as many as 30 miles a day. The victorious Germans came within less than a day's march of Paris. At this point, however, France's General Joffe re-grouped his troops for one last counter-attack. Striking on the 6th of September at the Marne River, Joffe caught the Germans by surprise. The battle raged for nearly a week, but by the end of the third day, the Germans were forced to retreat. Just as it had looked like they were defeated, however, the Germans stopped retreating, dug trenches, and waited for their enemies behind machine guns and barbed wire. Five hundred thousand soldiers were killed and wounded that week in one of history's most brutal blood baths, but the French could not penetrate Germany's defenses and the battle ended in a crimson stalemate.

Stalemate on the Western Front

Digital History

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu

The nature of warfare changed with Germany's discovery that a few men in a trench with machine guns could practically halt an entire regiment. Both sides soon applied this lesson. By November 1914, two endless lines of trenches stretched some 600 miles from the English Channel, across Belgium and France and into Switzerland. Sometimes these lines were separated by no more than a few hundred yards — at other times by more than five miles. In between, thousands of miles of barbed wire lay coiled against a ground attack behind which was the artillery, ready to fire shells at enemy positions. Neither side could advance against these lines of defense without suffering unacceptable losses. The lightening-like attacks of August were thus replaced by the muddy trenches of November filled with rats, rotting corpses, and the smell of death.

Stalemate on the Eastern Front

The stalemate on the Western Front was matched by a bloody and fruitless war in the East. During the early weeks of the war, Russian troops had advanced into Germany itself. They were driven back by German armies commanded by Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff. Russia's success against Austria-Hungary forced Germany to come to its aid, and once again German armies triumphed. The Russians beat a slow retreat, drawing Germany's armies deeper and deeper into the vast stretches of this huge country. Still, despite their successes in battle, the Germans were unable to defeat the Russians, and in the East as well as the West, the war was stalemated with neither side able to claim victory.

Desperation

Thus the war of attack in August 1914, changed to a war of attrition that November. Like mighty wrestlers of equal strength, each side grasped for anything that might give it an advantage. The ability of each to raise, equip, and feed armies became increasingly important. Trade with neutral nations such as the United States would soon play an essential role in fighting World War I. As the country with the world's largest economy and greatest military potential, the United States could be pivotal in determining the final outcome of the war.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Sum up the various events that led to an outbreak of the fighting.
2. If your teacher directs, assume the country's role you played in the Alliance game and state why you think the other side (either Austria-Hungary and Germany, or Serbia, Russia, Great Britain, and France) was responsible for starting World War I. Be prepared to defend your country and its allies from any blame for their actions. (E.g.: Serbia gave a conciliatory reply; Austria was upset about its Archduke believing that Serbia was to blame; Germany tried to get all the countries not to fight; etc. Note also that Serbia could be blamed for the assassination, Austria-Hungary for their demands, Germany for the 'blank check,' Russia for mobilizing early, etc.)
3. Objectively speaking, what actions by both sides could be judged irresponsible and be blamed for starting World War I?